# Duanaire Not Death: An Antrim Example of the Pen being Mightier than the Sword

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# Contents

# Duanaire Not Death:
## An Antrim example of the pen being mightier than the sword

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One could argue that there are, in Ireland, three main Ossianic texts, spreading over the last thousand years. These are Acallamh na Senórach (Colloquy with the Ancients) composed in the 12th century, the collection of Ossianic verse which became known as Duanaire Finn (the Poem-Book of Fionn) compiled between 1626-27 and the three-volume edition of this manuscript (1908, 1933 and 1953). This essay looks at the circumstances under which Duanaire Finn and its edited volumes were compiled and delves into the mindset of those who undertook the work.

*Keywords: Ballad Poetry, Heroism, Native Poetry, Irish Poetry, Lays, Outlawry, Ossianic Tales, Folktales, Manuscript Tradition*

### 1. Introduction

Fionn Mac Cumhaill (of the Ossianic cycle) is, along with Cú Chulainn (of the Ulster cycle), one of the two main heroes of Irish mythology. Although the Ulster cycle is the older of the two traditions, it is the Ossianic cycle that has been the most popular for several hundred years. This essay will focus on the seemingly defeatist background of two Ossianic texts. These are the composition, between the years 1626 and 1627, under the patronage of Somhairle Mac Domhnaill, of the manuscript that has come to be known as Duanaire Finn and the three-volume edition of this manuscript edited by Eoin Mac Neill (1908) and Gerard Murphy (1933 and 1953). Mac Domhnaill and Mac Neill, as well as both hailing from County Antrim, were involved in physical resistance to English occupation of Ireland but seem to have concluded that preserving these stories/making them available to the public was a more effective way of maintaining Irish spirit and thus resisting imperial forces (thus the reference to a 'seemingly defeatist' nature of composition).

The dates of composition of the main Ossianic texts is testament to the flexibility and adaptability of the stories and ballads pertaining to Fionn Mac Cumhaill and his band of heroes. The Ulster cycle was given more attention (certainly by the scribes and nobility) prior to the 12th century, while the Ossianic stories existed orally and in the realms of the poorer classes. In an ironic twist, it was this lack of attention or interest among the higher classes that allowed the Ossianic tales to spring to prominence with the passage of time. There are three prevalent collections of Ossianic material. First we have the late 12th century composition known as Agallamh na Senórach. This almost-epic story,[1] as well as the lay-tradition it inspired, was the result of the cultural changes resulting from the Anglo-Norman invasion and the increase of European culture in Ireland. Nothing is known of the composer other than that which is obvious – he was of a mature age (by which I mean capable of this composition) in the late 12th century. The latter two compositions being the aforementioned Duanaire Finn and its edited volumes which I now discuss.

1. Given the work of Murray (2017), it may be wise to avoid classifying Agallamh na Senórach as an epic tale. Despite having epic elements it falls short in other aspects (it isn't purely in poetic form, for example).

## 2.1 Duanaire Finn: The Manuscript

This manuscript, despite initial confusion (Mac Neill believed the Irish-language version of Ostend was in fact an elaborate form of the word 'anois' meaning 'now') when the first of the edited volumes was published at the start of the last century, was compiled in Belgium.[2] Almost nothing is known of the scribe, Aodh Ó Dochartaigh. He left Inishowen, in the north of Donegal, and ended up in Belgium, a fact known only from his correspondence with his patron. Ó Dochartaigh proves himself to be a competent editor as well as having most likely composed three of the lays to be found in the collection (Nagy, 2003). Contained in the manuscript are; 1) a copy of Agallamh na Senórach, 2) a fragment of a story that cuts off in its third page and is followed by one hundred blank pages;,3) the collection of 69 lays that have come to be known as Duanaire Finn, and 4) a two-page poem written by a man who signs off as 'a poor friar'. The fact that a copy of Agallamh na Senórach is contained in this manuscript makes it arguably the most important Ossianic manuscript in existence. Given his quality as a scholar and editor, there is little doubt that he understood the value of preceding work with Agallamh na Senórach, the initial work from which the lay-culture sprung to prominence.

2. This can be seen in – Eoin Mac Neill Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn. Part 1 (London: The Irish Texts Society, 1908), xviii.

## 2.2 Somhairle's Inspiration

To return to Somhairle Mac Domhnaill, we must look at Duanaire Finn in the context of the Counter-Reformation and the Irish fight for freedom. The Mac Domhnaill clan had land in Antrim, in east Ulster, and in Scotland at the start of the seventeenth century.[3] It is an eventful 25 odd years brings us from 1600 A.D. up to the compilation of Duanaire Finn. The Gaelic aristocracy was defeated at the Battle of Kinsale. The Treaty of Mellifont where O'Neill, the great chief in Tyrone, submitted and surrendered a large amount of land and power was signed in 1603. 1607 saw the Flight of the Earls, in which O'Neill and other important figures fled to the continent to seek help in fighting the British. Ultimately, they wouldn't return. 1609 brought the Plantation of Ulster and 1610 brought the event that affected Somhairle most personally. His uncle, Randall, yielded 2,000 acres of land near Coleraine, in Derry, for the purposes of the plantation. We need only look at the Anglicisation of his name to see where Randall's loyalty lay. He was indeed well compensated for this surrender of land. This led to a number of family members mounting a failed rising against Randall. Somhairle carried out a year-long campaign but only proved a slight nuisance, eventually fleeing to the continent to escape piracy charges. He joined the Spanish army and, by all accounts, had a good career.

3. For more about the life of Somhaire Mac Domhnaill, see – Ruairí Ó hUiginn, "Duanaire Finn: Patron and text," in Duanaire Finn: Reassessments, edited by John Carey, 79-106. London: The Irish Texts Society, 2003.

Somhairle now knew that gathering these lays was his most effective option in continuing some form of campaign against British rule in Ireland. The Duanaire connects the Irish people to the Fenian heroes much as the Annals of the Four Masters would connect Irish Catholicism to Biblical times when it would be compiled a few years later. Somhairle, knowing any physical battle was futile, and that his fight against the English was over, saw the compilation of this Duanaire as a means to incite the Irish to continue their fight. Having himself fought for Irish freedom, Somhairle most likely considered himself a modern day Fionn Mac Cumhaill. He also, most likely, romantically indulged himself and the idea of being a Fiann-member until you take up farming. This notion would have been reinforced, in his mind, by his family's loss of land.

## 2.3 Variance from the Norm in the Ossianic Cycle

Certain elements of the Ossianic cycle made it ideal for the task at hand. The main hero, Fionn Mac Cumhaill, differs from what we would expect. He is first and foremost a poet gifted with great knowledge. His first intentional violent adventure is to seek revenge for the death of another poet. This journey takes him to the fairy otherworld – an indicator of his knowledge. We are therefore reminded that someone can still become a hero despite not necessarily choosing that way of life, much as the Irish would be forced to fight foreign invasion in self-defence. We can clearly display Fiannaíocht's variance from the norm by looking at a very popular scenario in the heroic journey, the Vater-Söhnes-Kampf or father-son-struggle, wherein the heroic father, not recognising his own son, kills him. Stories of Cú Chulainn, Il'ya of Murom, Rostam in Persian mythology, or Heracles in Greek mythology all contain this scenario.

This common scenario, however, is not applied in Fiannaíocht. The opposite, in fact, is true. In one story of Oisín's birth, Fionn doesn't know that he has a son but finds a child in the woods and immediately recognises him as his son. So the question is why does Fiannaíocht vary from the norm? These other heroes, to protect society must be the last of their line. Essentially, the hero must kill his son in order to protect society. Dean Miller (2006) describes the hero as the 'perfect solipsist' whose timeline is 'intense but brief.' The hero's son could be potentially dangerous and, therefore, no trace of the hero can remain.

Fionn and the Fianna, however, serve to protect us, by us being reminded that we are descended from them. They remind us of past achievements and our ability to endure unfavourable odds. There is a ninth century story of a falling out between Fionn and Oisín. Kuno Meyer (1910) points out that the general Fiannaíocht universe does not bear the weight of this story. We instead developed a humorous and burlesque tale in which the father and son quarrel over alleged cheating during a game of chess. In short, the aim of these stories of Fionn's recognising Oisín in the woods and a petty quarrel is to remind us that the Fianna did not die out but are in fact the ancestors of the modern Irish. They, in this role, serve as an example of how the Irish should put personal differences aside and fight the true enemy.

## 2.4 The Changing Enemy in Ossianic Tradition

Oisín, having magically outlived his comrades, meets St. Patrick who proceeds to record Oisín's stories. This would suggest the stories were recited and recorded in the mid 5th century. One lay that Oisín supposedly recites to Patrick, and is included in Duanaire Finn, encourages the Irish to resist Viking attacks. This presents two problems. The first being that the stories couldn't be written – Wim Tigges states that, although believed to have come with Patrick, the first Irish written records probably date to the 7th century (Tigges and O Béarra, 2006). The second problem is that, at the time of Patrick, the Vikings were yet to attack. This suggests that as early as the 12th century (the source from which Ó Dochartaigh copied this lay is probably from the 12th century, or itself a copy of said 12th century manuscript), people were adapting Ossianic stories to their current needs. Mac Domhnaill echoes this adaption when he decides that the best use of his resources is to obtain a scholar who can compile and, through the copying of the manuscript, spread these Ossianic tales and awaken the courage of the Irish people.

## 2.5 Eoin Mac Neill and the Edited Volume

Moving into late 19th and early 20th century Ireland, Eoin Mac Neill was very active in political events of the time. The demands of this turbulent period of Irish history ultimately took precedent over his academic works. Mac Neill undertook his endeavour as a pastime, his interest perhaps inspired by county links, and was never able to devote enough time. As a result, a number of mistakes managed to creep into his work. Mac Neill (1908) does however readily admit to faults in the project, quoting time constraints and the fact that he initially started the project for his own interest and with no interest in publication. He ultimately passed his work to Murphy, who proved to be a better scholar. We must now ask ourselves why Mac Neill changed his mind. He simply says that he was convinced by someone he told of his work (Ibid). I would argue something a little deeper. I believe that Mac Neill (who 8 years later issued orders to cancel the Easter Rising) saw fighting the English on a martial level as futile. He had, through his study, become aware of Somhairle's life and experiences, and drawn comparisons between the Ireland of Somhairle's time and his own, and perhaps between himself and Somhairle. He realised, like Somhairle, that the best way to continue the fight was to preserve tradition.

## 3. Conclussion

Both the manuscript and the edited volumes that followed show how two prominent figures in fighting foreign invasion in Ireland realised that the most successful method of resistance (at that given stage) was not to fight on a martial level but to preserve a culture that could one day incite the native Irish to take up arms at a more opportune time. Conveniently, the main heroic saga in Ireland, not by learned but by oral influence, varied enough from the normal heroic saga that they could utilise it as they needed it at that time. Fionn Mac Cumhaill, by not being the normal hero, was able to become the national hero and Mac Domhnaill and Mac Neill, by fighting on a cultural level, and contributing to literature, left a contribution that they couldn't have had they died in battle.

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